

GOING GOING-UP

Little Radcliffe visits Sibbersfield Hall for the biggest country house sale in fifteen years.

The picture books for auction were, that's the way, not done I should say, but they were not done. It's just that the pictures are such a wonderful form of entertainment.

A good sale brings up the same emotions - anticipation, spirit, good business, business, money, sympathy and love a few more. Indeed, if you want to be a better person in the way, a higher sale is to see a place as more to make your own.

A week or so before Christmas just such a sale started in what the great owners of Sibbersfield Hall, Charles, between Charles and James, came under the hammer. There was three viewing days, and since early was by complete advertising and seeing one around a time, the "business" nature of the public was fairly effectively excluded.

It was obviously going to be a big sale but I ran down for the second day of viewing - a Sunday - and arrived without three minutes of the house leaving only to find close on 200 cars already in the parking area.

In the Hall was a life's work of collecting - including, standing more or less in the Geoffrey Butler had lived at Sibbersfield since the 1830s but had done much of his buying before that period, when his prices, if not his names, were low for a few years. He retired from the family business, which bore his name, in 1925, and in the same year became a director of the Liverpool Cotton Association (incidentally he also captured the Cheshire name later). With his wife, Dorothy, he started a fishing interest in collecting antiques and here was I on the same Sunday morning and admiring the fruits of two combined interests, which reached back to a period well before I was born. Mr. Buttery did explain this year at the very considerable age of 87, his wife having pre-deceased him by a few months.

So here it was - a conjunction of educated taste, authority, money, a period of single

opportunity and, at the end, no chance to receive inquiries or to discuss in the collection for purchase before noon.

Viewing hours are over or two days. I had a jiffy to look at the collection of antiques, including the transmission of possession. Sales may be exciting but they have a quality of nervousness. What funds had turned the leaves of those books? What industry had led from those "foreign" agents? Who had changed the log of the table? What interest had that money captured stood, even before Geoffrey Buttery arrived in 7? This could never ever be told. One almost a venture of being it had been brought together and now at the risk of an error, the end of a lead of the moment of a finger, the hammer would rise and fall with one "bidding" on the Sunday and all the sales and beauty would reach away into the hands of other owners and dealers up and down the country.

Between the viewing and the sale, nature took on a dramatic appearance. The wind blew and the rain came down like rain rods, and the nerves of the great sale nature was tipped like the V of the Temple. The auctioneers and their henchmen were an unimpressive, and exhausting sight regarding the chairs but on the day there was little to be seen of the contents which had provided it.

The first day's selling was undoubtedly the most exciting. As it was the sale of the silver, the pictures, the books and much of the contents of the reception rooms. Unhappy I was not able to be there but I should mention some of the results: the pair of George II sauce tins and George II coffee pot which fetched £1,200 and £1,300 respectively, the Devonian naturalist's lantern cabinet which fell for the top figure, champagne flutes at £12,000 (it fell to a dealer but not before he had been chased to within £500 of the final bid by a private buyer), the Turner landscape water-colour which ran the national class at £11,500 and a - to the -

approximately £2,000 for a beautiful Adam neoclassical sideboard. One could argue that between these items have been sold by looking at the figures.

On the second day they were already on full cry when I arrived and fairly simply down on a note, stated that it was only late I discovered why I had found a seat so easy - the really big item, the Chinese stove on the top of my head had all the quality of a Chinese water torture.

I sat down at the auctioneer's table in the middle of the room, looking at the goods, including a magnificent Chinese Chippendale cabinet which was being in view of one hundred pounds each, with an exceptional and dignified top of the goods, it was knocked down for £1,570. Personally, we don't even see to a dealer, but had we got, I'm certain if it comes out for £125, we would have been pleased. The contents of this auction cleared £12,500.

I began to look around - through carefully used you, but an excellent bit of the yard should land me with a child's walnut "batter" chair or a Heppelwhite stool set, then was a mass-attack of the it was I saw one, a fine old set, obviously perfectly wearing a box of assorted bad from the come up at the end of the sale, started me by putting up the bidding on a sofa table by another £700, when I was already one of the £2,500 mark. Then there were the silver, bidding with an economy of

Above right "Imagine a girl and her in 1847" - a picture of a girl and her in 1847, which fetched £1,200 and £1,300 respectively.

Right A Devonian naturalist's lantern cabinet which fell for the top figure, champagne flutes at £12,000 (it fell to a dealer but not before he had been chased to within £500 of the final bid by a private buyer), the Turner landscape water-colour which ran the national class at £11,500 and a - to the -

Top left A study of a woman in 1847, which fetched £1,200.

Top right The pair of Adam neoclassical sideboards, which fetched £1,200 and £1,300.

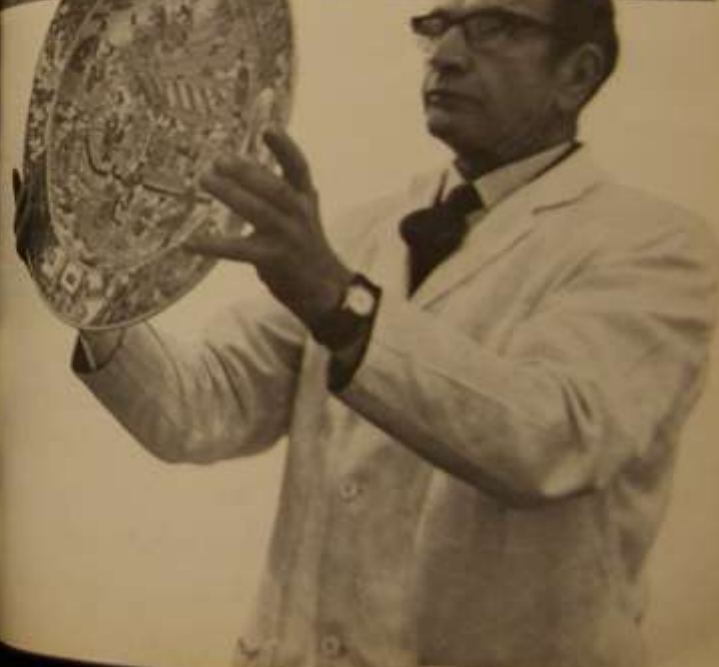
Right The set of neoclassical stone figures of Adam neoclassical, which fetched £1,570.

Far right Three sets of Adam neoclassical sideboards, which fetched £1,200 and £1,300.

Below right "Imagine a girl and her in 1847" - a picture of a girl and her in 1847, which fetched £1,200 and £1,300 respectively.

Right A Devonian naturalist's lantern cabinet which fell for the top figure, champagne flutes at £12,000 (it fell to a dealer but not before he had been chased to within £500 of the final bid by a private buyer), the Turner landscape water-colour which ran the national class at £11,500 and a - to the -

Far right The Tung Chong pattern, 1845, which fetched £1,200 and £1,300.



GOING GOING - UP

Leslie Radcliffe visits Sibbersfield Hall for the biggest country house sale in fifteen years.

An absolute sucker for auction sales, that's me. Not that I often buy anything; my bank manager would not approve. It's just that auctions are such a splendid form of entertainment.

A good sale brings out the basic instincts - acquisitive spirit, greed, frustration, humour, jealousy, sympathy and quite a few more. Indeed, if you want to see human nature in the raw, a bigish sale is as fine a place as most to make your observations.

A week or so before Christmas just such a sale cropped up, when the entire contents of Sibbersfield Hall, Churton, between Chester and Farndon, came under the hammer. There were three viewing days, and since entry was by catalogue admitting two and costing one pound a time, the "rubbernecking" section of the public was fairly effectively excluded.

It was obviously going to be a big turn out. I ran down for the second day of viewing - a Sunday - and arrived within fifteen minutes of the doors opening, only to find close on 200 cars already on the parking area.

In the Hall was a life's work of informed collecting, standing more or less *in situ*. Geoffrey Bushby had lived at Sibbersfield since the 1930s but had done much of his buying before that period, when fine pieces, if not two-a-penny, were two for a few pounds. He retired from the family business, which bore his name, in 1924, and in the same year became a director of the Liverpool Cotton Association (incidentally he also captained the Cheshire tennis team). With his wife, Dorothy, he shared a lifelong interest in collecting antiques and here was I on this sunny Sunday handling and admiring the fruits of their combined interests, which reached back to a period well before I was born. Mr. Bushby died earlier this year at the very considerable age of 97, his wife having pre-deceased him by a twelvemonth.

So here it all was - a conjunction of educated taste, scholarship, money, a period of ample

opportunity and, at the end, no children to receive bequests or to descend on the collection for plunder before probate.

Driving home an hour or two later, I found it difficult to avoid thinking of scriptural aphorisms concerning the transience of possessions. Sales may be exciting but they have a quality of sadness, too. What hands had turned the leaves of those books? What mouths had fed from those Georgian spoons? Who had chipped the leg of that table? Where indeed had that Regency cupboard stood, even before Geoffrey Bushby obtained it? This could never now be told. Over almost a century of living it had all been brought together and now, at the flick of an eyebrow, the nod of a head or the movement of a finger, the hammer would rise and fall with utter finality on six hundred lots, and all this value and beauty would melt away into the hands of other owners and dealers up and down the country.

Between the viewing and the sale, nature took up a disapproving stance. The wind blew and the rain came down like stair rods, and the canvas of the great sale marquee was ripped like the Veil of the Temple. The auctioneers and their henchmen spent an uncomfortable, wet and exhausting night repairing the chaos but on the day there was little to be seen of the torments which had preceded it.

The first day's selling was unquestionably the most exciting, for it saw the sale of the silver, the pictures, the books and much of the contents of the reception rooms. Unhappily I was not able to be there, but I drooled enviously over some of the results: the pair of George II sauce-boats and George II coffee pot which fetched £1,200 and £1,300 respectively, the Sheraton satinwood breakfast cabinet which hit the top figure, changing hands at £12,000 (it fell to a dealer but not before he had been chased to within £500 of his final bid by a private buyer), the Turner landscape water-colour which ran the cabinet close at £11,500 and a - to me -

surprising £6,000 for a brass-bound Adam mahogany wine-cooler. One could sense the tension there must have been, just by looking at the figures.

On the second day they were already in full cry when I arrived and sank damply down on a rickety, slatted chair. It was only later I discovered why I had found a seat so easily - the steady drip from the canvas above on to the top of my head had all the quality of a Chinese water torture.

I settled down as the auctioneer plunged in amongst the boudoir furniture and found my gaze focussing on a mahogany kneehole Chinese Chippendale cabinet which was rising in steps of one hundred pounds until, with an appreciative and dignified tap of the gavel, it was knocked down for £1,100. Personally, we don't even run to a boudoir, but had we one, I'm certain if its contents sold for £125, we would have been pleased. The contents of this boudoir cleared £12,500.

I began to look around - though carefully, mind you, lest an inadvertent lift of the head should land me with a child's walnut ladderback chair or a Hepplewhite towel rail. Here was a cross-section of life if ever I saw one; a little old lady, obviously patiently awaiting a box of assorted bed linen due to come up at the end of the sale, startled me by pushing up the bidding on a sofa table by another £100 when it was already clear of the £2,000 mark. Then there were the dealers, bidding with an economy of

Above right "Imagine a gift and take it this!" A gigantic Victorian hobnail and groove cut goblet and cover was knocked down for £150.

Right A George II wall mirror in red walnut and carved gilt-wood frame it displayed by the posters. It sold for £900.

Far right This Yung Cheng plaster, nobly decorated with figures in boats, gave rise to some spirited bidding and ultimately went for £600.

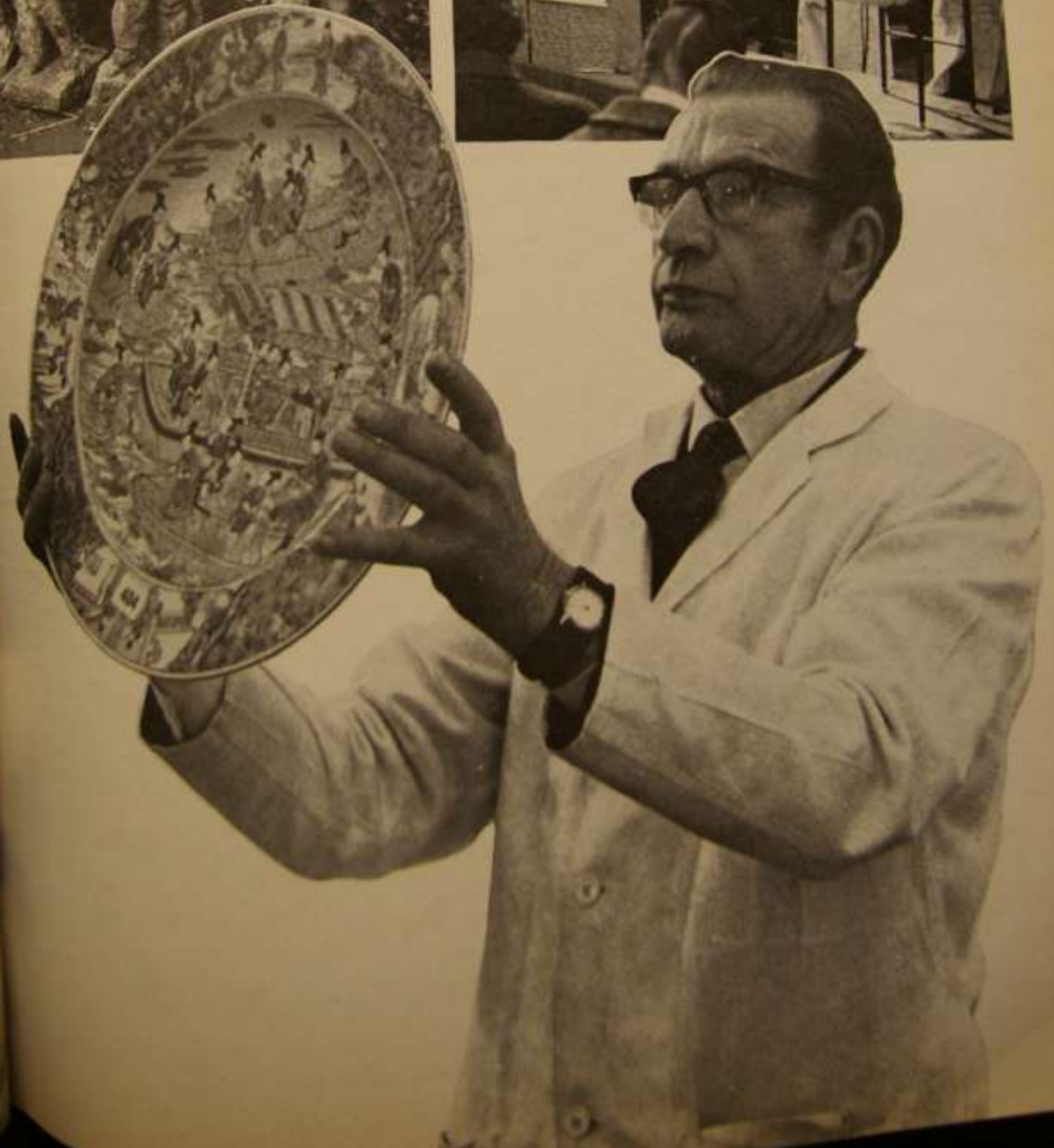
Top left A study in concentration while the bidding ascends.

Top right This blue and white garniture of five Kangaroo vases was sold at a single lot for £500.

Right This set of composite stone figures of pots (shown to you) depicts the four seasons. They sold for £330.

Far right There was little interest in this Sheraton sofa table in simulated satinwood which reached £550 before Mr. Graham Admit brought down his hammer.





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GOING, GOING—UP

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movement which would have done credit to the Lord Buddha himself — dealers tricked out in their suits and well-trimmed beards, dealers with open collars and the horny hands more usually associated with Mick McGahay's confederates, dealers who looked like fugitives from trails on Sandbach market. But they all seemed to have two things in common — long pocket books and complete equanimity, win or lose — and lose they did more often than not. With the exception of the Chinese ceramics, private buyers very largely took them to the laundry. As for the ring — illegal but still flourishing on such occasions — it hadn't a chance even if its operation had been contemplated.

The "rostrum party" provided interesting contrasts. First was Graham Adnitt, a director of Jackson-Stops & Staff. He sat there as though knocking down furniture at tens of thousands of pounds happened every day of his life — efficient, brisk, level-toned and no nonsense. Then he would slide smartly out of the hot seat to give place to Mr. Wingett, head of the Wrexham auctioneers of that name, who were an associate firm in the sale. Here was a more gravelly voice and a more knock-about

approach. "Now, ladies and gentlemen, here is a magnificent Victorian hobnail and groove cut covered goblet — just imagine a gin and tonic out of this!" A difficult exercise considering it was just under twenty inches high. He "gave it away", almost tearfully, for £150. In due time he, also, was replaced successively by two younger men in their twenties. They were obviously determined to put up a good show, prove their wisdom and skill to be in advance of their years and keep a firm hand on the assembled company. In stentorian tones they proclaimed the glories of each piece as though *sang de boeuf* ware and Ch'ien Lung dishes were their daily lot for breakfast cereals.

The sale wore on and the tension noticeably relaxed as the auctioneers began to deal with the "nitty-gritty", though the momentum of high bidding kept going to an extraordinary degree. Two ancient and peeling leather holdalls, the like of which, under the name of Gladstone bags, I dumped thirty years ago, galloped up to a remarkable £32, and a ping-pong table found a new home, after a rousing battle, at £55. Even a vacuum cleaner, so old it might well have been owned by Queen Victoria, swelled the total by 50p and by the time a limited quantity of wine came on offer we had the aged

family butler involved on the sidelines, punctuating the auctioneer's words with enthusiastic summaries of his late master's good taste in booze.

It was claimed to be the largest country house sale, moneywise, to have taken place in the last fifteen years. I have no idea. All I can say is that I have seldom before seen a covey of such satisfied-looking auctioneers after the last lot had gone.

For myself, I spent nothing (except 50p to a jolly character on a tractor who hauled me out of the mud of the car park) though once, just for the hell of it, I bid about £1,000 I did not

possess for something which I thought must surely make twice that amount — and it did — just for the spine-tingling moment of pause which, had it extended long enough to have brought down that infernal hammer, would first have put me into bankruptcy and then the divorce court.

A good auction is marvellous fun — and free entertainment, too. I do hope Geoffrey Bushby had time up there to cast a quizzical glance down on the dissolution of his old home. If he did, I am sure he had a chuckle or two over some of the prices achieved, knowing what he had paid half a century earlier.

"The bidding is against you, Sir — over on my right". Mr. Wingett disposes of a Sheraton mahogany sofa table for £2,400.

